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Reality Is Having A Hard Time

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Reality Is Having A Hard Time

by

Anthony Blair Creeden, B.F.A.

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

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DEDICATION:

For Julia,

My bravest editor in life and love.

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Reality Is Having A Hard Time

by

Anthony Blair Creeden, M.F.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

SUPERVISOR: Sarah Canright

This report outlines some of the questions, thoughts, and references I have recorded about the paintings made during my time at the University of Texas at Austin. Generally my work relies on a restricted palette of colors and direct mark making, built up in many layers of translucent egg tempera paint. Linked by personal narrative, the history of painting, and an obsession with science fiction, I strive to create a multivalent surface that opens up painting's long historic role and connects it with today's global culture of massive image-consumption.

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Chapter I.

Visual Language

> Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive.[1]
>
> All fiction is metaphor. Science fiction is metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of fiction seems to be its use of new metaphors, drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life—science, all the sciences, and technology, and the relativistic and historical outlook, among them. Space travel is one these metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology; the future is another. The future, in fiction, is a metaphor.
> A metaphor for what?
> If I could have said it non-metaphorically, I would not have written all these words, this novel; and Genly Ai would never have sat down at my desk and used up ink and typewriter ribbon in informing me, and you, rather solemnly, that the truth is a matter of the imagination.[2]

There is such a difference between visual and written languages for me. Writing is just structured in a way that doesn't always make sense for my work. It's like putting the wrong light on my painting. This is not the right light. It's linear, it's step-by-step. I don't think that there is a way to re-create, in written words, the connections I make between myself and the painting when it's in progress. The paintings don't need to do that. The paintings need to be, are meant to be, generative, and within the language of abstraction can hold subject matter that is seen differently by different viewers. The titles I give the work are simply a clue into some of the things I get when I step back from the completed painting, but don't necessarily have to do with what I was thinking about while the painting was being made. So when I discuss materials and the qualities and characteristics between those materials, that has nothing to do with my connection to the image itself that is being built up.

Writing about the image, in a sense, is trying to talk about something that's not there. If there remains something "real" in the painting, the painting would not be done.

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[1] Ursula K. Le Guin, "Introduction [1976]," *The Left Hand of Darkness* [1969] (New York: Ace Books, 2000), xii.
[2] Le Guin, xvi.

It's like trying to describe a state of mind when you're not in that state of mind. You need to be experiencing it in order to clue someone in to what you are feeling. Or maybe it's the other way, maybe you can't be in that state of mind and talk about it. I guess, maybe I do feel defensive; I don't feel like when I'm writing about the painting, that I'm putting the painting in the right light. And then you can't see it, so to me it's frustrating.

The visual language within the paintings is meant to be confusing to the written language. When I have a specific reference in mind, I *could* clearly talk about that reference, but it avoids the painting entirely. The paintings are ideas conveyed through visual language. They are ideas and thought experiments that are being worked out on a canvas. There are relationships that build up between marks that, like words strung together, swirl around and come to you as the expression of an idea, and those ideas relay subject matter. But the paintings are strictly visual.

Sometimes I'm overwhelmed by the amount of information I have stored up over the years, and when someone asks me about the connections between two entire fields, say science fiction and the history of painting, and how do they connect in one of my paintings, it's too hard to pick one point between them. Like when someone asks me—*What is your favorite song in the whole world?*—that is a ridiculous question for me to take seriously. It's just too broad of a question to ask someone to narrow down. I begin to unpack the entire thing, because narrowing it all down to just one connection negates all of the things you find important and visually great. That's maybe why talking about these kinds of questions is slightly easier because you're in a specific context: like in *this* moment, I'm feeling *this* way about these paintings.

In order to make a painting you have to have all of these kinds of languages, then you put it on a wall and you have to think about how *other* people will see it. You're constantly getting in and out of a headspace. But when the painting is done you can't get back into that "working" headspace, as if your apron is on. If you're able to get back into that, the painting isn't finished any longer. So writing about a painting, how one move leads to another, what went into it that decision, it's so counterproductive for me. It's like "un-finishing" a painting, or trying to start a painting again that is already finished (The

painting title *Marty's "No!"* stems from an awareness of that back-and-forth overlapping. It's the moment we watch an actor playing a time traveler watch himself in the past remake a mistake he already made in the future, one that he's trying to correct.) It's a kind of cognitive dissonance: trying to hold two or more opposing views or opinions of something at the same time.

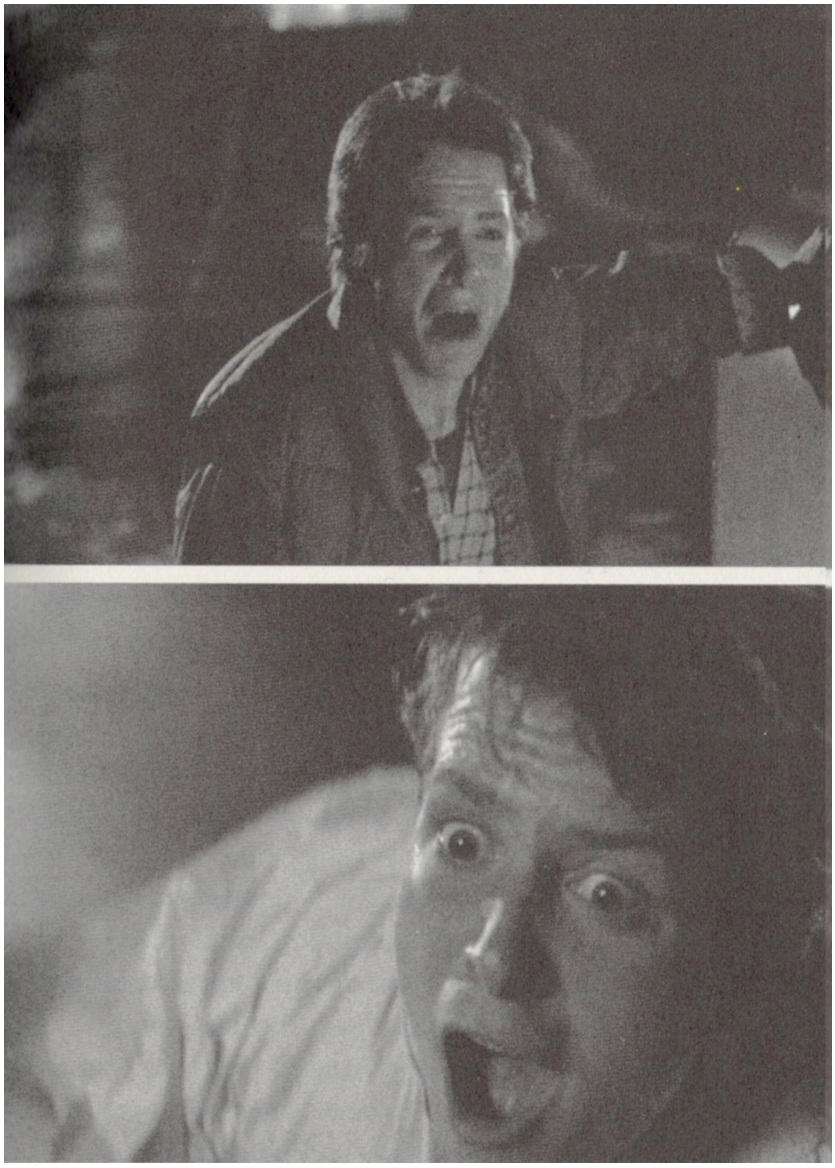

Figure 1. *Back to the Future*, Marty's "No!". Two black and white stills of the color film directed by Robert Zemeckis (Universal, 1985) as reproduced in David Wittenberg's *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*.

All of this is to say that visual language is not as straightforward to write about—it becomes about referencing other things, subjectively. I'm interested in writing about the characteristics that come with using egg tempera that allow me to push depth and maintain a certain flatness, a particular type of mark-making that is both direct and built up over many layers. For instance, there are similarities in the kind of visual language that I'm using in my two newest paintings, *"Chariots of the gods, man."* and *I.A.*, both 2017. (Figs. 2 and 3)

There is a language that comes out of the intuitive, gestural mark-making process that keeps the painting (the picture) as non-referential and abstract as possible, with an understanding that those distinct marks are ultimately being used to generate a figural image in the end. I would almost say it's like reverse engineering an abstract painting, so that you notice and respond to the figural aspects, but upon inspection it breaks up into an abstract collection of distinct marks.

Figure 2. Anthony B. Creeden, ***"****Chariots of the gods, man."*, 2017.
Egg tempera on muslin. 97 x 82 inches.

Figure 3. Anthony B. Creeden, *I.A.*, 2017.
Egg tempera on muslin. 56 x 48 inches.

I can't remember the exact interview with Jonathan Lasker, but, in a weird way, I do remember this interview with Michelle Grabner where she quotes Lasker at length:

> Over the past two years, there has been a gradual increase of interest in abstraction. During this time I've puzzled over what this so-called return to abstraction could mean. I still can't imagine it. For me, abstract painting finished with the black paintings of Frank Stella. The goal of modern painting, which represented nothing but its pure form, has been attained. When I begin working, my objective was to find a way to make my paintings discursive, rather than mono-topical. It is now possible to use our experience of the elements of paint for their associative powers within the poetics of painting. Poetics could also embrace broad topics, such as memory and presence, materiality and transcendence, and the flattening of high and low. It is towards this end that I have painted the biomorphic and the decorative, the mark of the loaded brush, and the geometric, the psyche and popular culture. I want painting that's operative. I am seeking subject matter, not abstraction.[3]

Grabner continues, "And the kick here is that it was written in 1986 by Jonathan Lasker. It sounds like it could have been written today." I don't make Jonathan Lasker paintings, but I do desire the direction toward the discursive within abstraction. I'm also not into the "end-game," mono-topical discussion around abstract painting. I feel like the Rymans and Stellas, the end-game players, were trying to bring painting down to its bare-bone maneuvers, like asking what is the leanest looking thing you can formally do to retain the "poetics of painting" but keep the trappings of bourgeois culture at a distance. They would usually just end up repeating something over and over. A straight line, one painted next to another. It's a very simple form of painterly verisimilitude. Maybe those particular artists like Ryman or Stella weren't looking for the potential rhizomic connections. Pop artists certainly were, long before the internet came along. The end-game approach to painting was about the tapering of a linear discussion (the history of painting), but a discursive approach tends to keep the conversation moving. There are concerns, of course, that have come about alongside the internet. The internet is sometimes best described as a mile-wide river that's an inch deep. It's a huge, vast amount of information that really is just surface. So painting can easily fall into that, too.

[3] Jonathan Lasker, quoted by Michelle Grabner in "Opening-Day Talk: Painting in the Present Tense" (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scYj-bDEaKI&feature=em-share_video_user.

I think that's where a lot of these very flat, shallow-content paintings are being criticized today. There is a ton of stuff, an endless sea of connections, but ultimately there is nothing beneath it all. And frankly that, as a metaphor for reality, is weak and irresponsible. Whereas the mono-topical has huge depth but such a narrow focus that it's hard to breathe, there is no perspective. And ideally I want to make paintings somewhere in-between the two.

Chapter II.

Paper Ghosts

In relation to individual mark making and the accumulation of layered colors, I keep coming back to two, completely unrelated videos that get at some ideas I continue to use. One, kind of an informal documentary on graffiti artists in Philadelphia, demonstrates an artist's writing technique and explains how a letter of the alphabet ("N" in this case) can be elaborated and worked on to the extent that it develops a distinct look. It's a one-and-a-half minute clip that tries to break down decades of experience and hours of practice into a step-by-step process, and ends with the admittance that the viewer still may not fully comprehend the artist's language.

Figure 4. "Notorious BIK – Old School Philly Graff Demo."
Screen capture from YouTube video, 2008.

The second one, which seems to have started as a kind of a joke or meme on YouTube, shows every single episode of the TV show *Friends*, but played all at once, all layered on top of one another. I came across this video online after I'd been making colorfully

layered, all-over abstract paintings for a few years, and it really made me laugh at how (unintentionally) visually similar they are.

Figure 5. "Every episode of *Friends* played at the same time."
Screen capture from YouTube video, 2017.

So, here we have language, abstraction, color, and light. And I'm going to backtrack slightly in order to talk about the painting *Paper Ghost*, 2017 (Fig.6), which slightly preceded *I.A.* and *"Chariots of the gods, man*." I have been thinking about the term "ghost" and the many connotations around it. One connection I focused on was how a ghost, in a sense, really describes the history of studying a painted surface with the presence of the artist who made it. The brush mark works as an indexical sign, constantly pointing toward the (invisible) artist regardless of what the image is. I kept thinking about what art historian and curator Isabelle Graw wrote in a recent essay for the exhibition catalog *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*, "Regards of its depiction or reference, a painting will be perceived as a physical manifestation of its absent author. It

is through the indexicality of painting that the absent author retains a ghostlike physical presence in the work."[4]

In order to emphasize that connection, between an image of a ghost and the ghost-like presence of the artist, I began to paint pieces of blue tape and torn, crinkled craft paper—very simple "preliminary" materials that an artist would use around the studio. The subject matter became about the artist making the painting. There are a number of small pieces of blue tape that also happen to have the same lift and edges of a unique brush mark. I wanted this tape to work in two ways: first to be as tape, performing its function visually and seemingly holding or adhering what looks like a torn swatch of paper. And at the same time, I wanted the blue tape to reference (slightly) opaque blue brush marks. This performing-as-tape and as a stand-in for a brush mark references the performance and presence of the maker and also questions it. Except for the opaque blue paint—in which I used an alkyd medium—the entire surface is egg tempera. Making the surface completely smooth and texture-less, taking away a vital component to the ghostly presence. The crinkled, water-like paper is even built up in many, many colorful layers of egg tempera using an airbrush, to help push that flatness of the surface even further while retaining a kind of luminous depth.

The presence of the "ghost" in this painting is all in the negative space around the painted paper, including the fragments of a smiley face. This distinctively goofy face, which someone once described as having a "shit-eating grin," has been such a long part of my visual vocabulary that it just feels ingrained. I used the smiley face in my earlier cut film pieces on glass as well. It's something I fall back on when I don't want the painting to have too specific of a reference, so it's a very non-specific, universal representation of a face.

[4] Isabelle Graw, "The Economy of Painting: Notes on the Vitality of a Success Medium and the Value of Liveliness," in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*, ed. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit (Munich: Museum Brandhorst and Ludwig Wein: mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung, 2015), 260.

Figure 6. Anthony B. Creeden. *Paper Ghost*, 2017.
Egg tempera and alkyd on muslin. 70 x 60 inches.

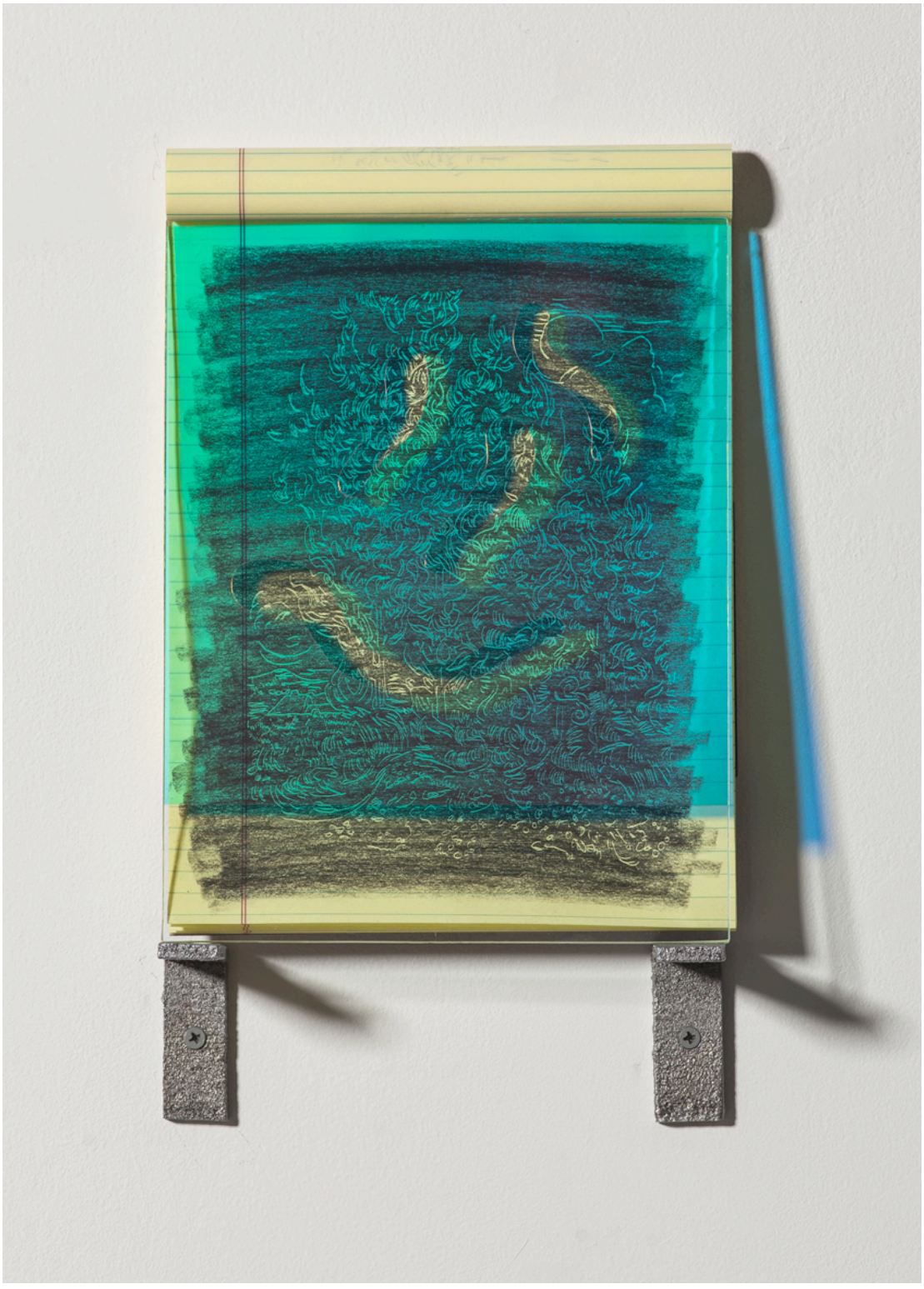

Figure 7. Anthony B. Creeden, *Impressionisms (van Gogh),* 2015.
Glass, dichroic film, cast aluminum, and charcoal on paper. 14 x 8 ½ inches.

Figure 8. Anthony B. Creeden, *Casca Grossa #6*, 2015.
Egg tempera on linen. 12 x 8 inches.

In a way these also relate to my earlier *Casca Grossa* paintings. It's about laying down distinct marks in the form of a figural shape. *Casca Grossa* (Fig 8) is about the kind of skin-like quality of egg tempera paint being pulled across a rough weave of linen. The term *casca grossa* in Portuguese means "thick-skinned" or "hard-skinned," which is used to describe the heads and faces of fighters and athletes who have had their skin pushed across a surface (of a boxing ring or a wrestling mat), the friction making their facial features doughy and considered, in extreme cases, grotesque. To do an abstract portrait of a tough guy in colorful egg tempera, it must be done on really rough linen.

So, my interest in facture—from smooth egg tempera, to rough linen, to the "ghostlike" presence of the artist—comes from its historical connection to the specificity of painting. And what I mean is that painting has a long relationship to its surface, how it's made, and I find that to be an irreducible component to a painting, as opposed to its image. Similarly, other methods of image making also share irreducible features, and mostly that comes out of their processes of creation as well. I'm interested in my paintings incorporating these other mediums' irreducible features and then thereby making a kind of multivalent vocabulary, which welcomes the features of other image-making mediums, such as print, textile, and video. It is subtle but you could say it's the suffusion of color in a textile, or the mottling of ink in old offset litho print, and the kind of glossy suspension of color found in video or television. I'm trying to incorporate the visual language of these other mediums, and what distinguishes them from each other, at a fundamental level, are the physically distinctive attributes bound to them by their methods of production. I'm coordinating the materials I use to build up my paintings so they relate to other image-making processes.

I've been thinking about painting for long enough that it becomes easier to make visual connections between moments in the painting I am working on and what I see day to day outside the studio. Another connection between film and my work is not just the relationship to color and indexical marks, but also light, bright light. One of the irreducible features of film and video is that it is projected, either onto a computer screen or onto a wall, and projected light has the distinct feature of causing an "after-image": the

fatiguing of rods in the eye when over-exposed to light. In essence it leaves a visual "hole" in the shape of whatever it is you were staring at for too long. I noticed in the larger paintings, like *Marty's "No!"* (Fig 9) that triangular sections between the layers of paint, that missed certain coverage by the brush, reminded me of after-images. Glowing voids, randomly popping up within the field of colors. This goes along nicely with my interest in building up my work in ways that connect with distinctive features within film/video, print, and textile. Just as a bright, projected light is needed to see the image of film on a wall, so, too enough light is needed with translucent layers of egg tempera. So when my paintings are installed they usually require a sufficient amount of light, preferably cool LED or daylight. Light bounces through the layers of paint that are built up like colorful scrims, similar to a single frame of film, both needing sufficient light in order to project what's on them.

There are also pragmatic decisions that lead to the kind of paintings I am making now. I wanted scale to be larger so that it was more of a field that could surround the viewer, connecting also, in a way, to the filmic experience. But there were restrictions to using egg tempera on a large, gessoed surface. Large heavy panels were required to reinforce the brittleness of rabbit skin glue gesso. So I needed to be able to make paintings that weren't gessoed. Finding a support with a fine weave (a less textured surface) became important, muslin being the best solution because of its absorbent qualities. It is somewhat sheer but strong enough to hold the paint, to take the mark. The texture of the linen I used earlier in the *Casca Grossa* (Fig 8) paintings has now been smoothed out with a fine muslin, an almost imperceptible weave, but distinct in that it has a new way of absorbing the paint that reminds me of dyed textiles or sublimation printing on t-shirts. It opened up the painting's facture to another kind of process. The work now contains a more generative language through these visual connections to other materials and image sources.

Figure 9. Anthony B. Creeden, *Marty's "No!"*. 2016.
Egg tempera on muslin. 97 x 82 inches.

A painting is seen as a one-off thing, whereas the mechanical production of print, textile, and video make them reproducible. The strength of painting is its slipperiness amongst all these different types of mass-image making. That is, it's able to incorporate the language of print, even though painting precedes it, or the language of photography, even though painting also precedes it. Painting has a way of incorporating the language of other mediums that are created as our technologies evolve. So when I ask myself, "Why painting, when you have all these other ways of making images?" I have to also ask the question: "What is it about a painting that makes it distinct from those other options?" I would argue that it is painting's ability to use this slippage to its advantage, to incorporate the distinctiveness of those other mediums, and remain a unique object (not easily reproduced) at the same time.

This is why the 1982 movie *The Thing* keeps resurfacing for me, especially in *"Chariots of the gods, man."* (Fig. 2), which is a quote used in that film. The character who says that line is probably citing something like the *National Enquirer*, using it to describe aliens, or specifically to describe their space ships. The characters in the film need to know what the "Thing" is, to break down what they're experiencing and start throwing out familiar terms or concepts to do so. In this particular painting I've taken bits and pieces from the other work (specifically the ones in my thesis show) and made an image that could be described as a moment in transition: it's amorphic and contains bits and pieces found in the other works. There are aspects of this movie, *The Thing*, where the alien creature is caught, or walked in on, by other characters in the midst of transforming between two bodies, like for instance between a dog and another character in the movie it contacts. In the *Chariots* painting, I laid in actual moments of my other paintings, like the eye section of *Paper Ghost* to stand in, vaguely, as a potential eye in the larger work, as well as the cardboard stencil used in *I.A.* for another eye. I'm trying to reference the "Thing," but I'm not trying to recreate it, exactly. I'm interested in the connection between the generative spirit of science fiction, its potential and uses as a platform for content. I want to allow people to approach it differently, experience their

own subjective readings within a static image. So therefore, these paintings heavily allude to the visual language within science fiction to make that connection.

Even though it is a film set up for the viewer to be afraid of the protagonist, an alien-creature that constantly absorbs other living forms, I actually relate to the perspective of the "Thing," which for me is a great metaphor for abstract painting. It is a visual representation of something you know is there, but you're not able to see it distinctly or in concrete terms. There is no origin. There is no Platonic form of the "Thing," and that is what abstraction is. It's a visual representation of the space between concrete terms, but you know that space is there just as much as you know the stuff on either side of it is there. Just as you are aware of the empty, silent space between two musical notes. So this alien tries to learn about its environment, the boundaries in which it exists, and at the same time, survive. It, like painting, must adapt by absorbing and re-creating, emulating, anything and everything, piecemeal, around it, and in the process creating something new.

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